Get Your Facts Straight

Obtaining accurate information is crucial in relocation

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As a young relocation agent, I was asked to relocate what the agency said was a family of three from a one bedroom rental unit. However, the female head of the household told me that there were actually four persons living there. She stated that she and her husband shared the bedroom with their infant daughter while the fourth person, her "identical twin sister," slept on the couch in the living room.

As the relocation progressed, I met the couple and their daughter but could never seem to catch up with the twin sister. Verifying the twin's occupancy was important because in this jurisdiction, occupancy ordinances called for an upgrade to two bedrooms for four occupants.

When I asked the head of household to arrange an appointment with the twin, she immediately gave me a date and time to meet. I found it odd that she didn't consult her sister before making an appointment but brushed it off. When I arrived for the appointment, the "twin" could not produce any documents with her name on it nor other evidence of occupancy. I found this strange but asked her to keep looking. (I did notice, however, that the sister looked amazingly similar to the head of household, even for a twin.)

I called back later and spoke to the husband. When I inquired about the twin sister, he laughed and told me his wife was really an only child! He had wanted to tell me the truth but was waiting until his wife was not around. He explained that his wife had her heart set on a two bedroom unit.

Let's Verify That

As this story emphasizes, a relocation agent has an ethical duty to verify information provided for the calculation of benefits, especially when dealing with displacees who understandably feel angry, anxious and vulnerable. Often times, tight construction schedules can tempt the agent to "just take their word for it" and quickly begin calculating benefits based on conflicting or incomplete information. Since tenant relocation benefits can be quite sizable depending on the number of occupants per rental unit, displacees may attempt to rush the agent into accepting sketchy information to secure greater benefits.

To counteract this, the agent should explain the importance of accurate information and request adequate documentation. Each alleged occupant should produce identification and be able to show actual occupancy of the unit, such as having clothing and other personal effects in the unit. Additionally, mail addressed to the occupants and government-issued identification cards should reflect the address of the unit. Actually interviewing each adult occupant can also help to substantiate occupancy. No matter what, the agent should take the time necessary to verify occupancy of all household members alleged to reside in the dwelling. After all, it is the relocation agent who will be held accountable by state and federal auditors long after a displacee is relocated.

Working With Commercial Displacees

The problem of obtaining accurate information for benefit calculations is not limited to residential displacees. Commercial displacees have businesses to run and may have little time to devote to the relocation process. But getting accurate information is critical when bids are obtained, especially because these can amount to millions of dollars for complex business relocations. The

agent may feel pressure from the business owner and his experts to accept bids and other information that is not well documented. Therefore, it is up to the agent to be present during the bidding and inventory processes and to ask any necessary questions in order to understand the bid. If the relocation agent cannot understand how the bid was arrived at, neither will an auditor.

Some displacees provide estimates with generic scopes of work unrelated to the specific business being relocated. Even worse, the bid may include items that are already paid for in the real estate appraisal. These types of inaccurate bids can make it easier for a displacee to profit from relocation benefits instead of only receiving payment for eligible "actual, reasonable and necessary" expenses as intended by the URA. A list of line items without a detailed accounting of where the numbers came from is not a proper bid. Every item being claimed for non-residential relocation benefits should be independently justified and reviewed.

An Ethical Responsibility

The relocation agent is a guardian of public funding and is ethically responsible to ensure compliance with applicable rules. Inaccurate benefit analysis can result in an inadvertent and impermissible gift of public funds. And as the national economic climate changes and sometimes worsens, displacees may be tempted to try to profit from the relocation process.

Relocation professionals have an ethical duty to make sure displacees understand that relocation benefits are only for "actual, reasonable and necessary" eligible expenses, while helping them maximize their benefits under the rules. Bowing to schedule pressures or the emotions and profit motives of displacees is not an acceptable substitute for carrying out the relocation agent's ethical duties. ✪

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